# John Calvin’s Geneva – Stephen Hicks, Ph.D.

An argument-by-example for the separation of church and state. According to William Manchester’s excellent *A World Lit Only by Fire*, p. 190:

‘All Protestant regimes were stiffly doctrinal to a degree unknown—until now—in Rome. John Calvin’s Geneva, however, represented the ultimate in repression. The city-state of Geneva, which became known as the Protestant Rome, was also, in effect, a police state, ruled by a Consistory of five pastors and twelve lay elders, with the bloodless figure of the dictator looming over all.

In physique, temperament, and conviction, Calvin (1509–1564) was the inverted image of the freewheeling, permissive, high-living popes whose excesses had led to Lutheran apostasy. Frail, thin, short, and lightly bearded, with ruthless, penetrating eyes, he was humorless and short-tempered. The slightest criticism enraged him. Those who questioned his theology he called “pigs,” “asses,” “riffraff,” “dogs,” “idiots,” and “stinking beasts.” One morning he found a poster on his pulpit accusing him of “Gross Hypocrisy.” A suspect was arrested. No evidence was produced, but he was tortured day and night for a month till he confessed. Screaming with pain, he was lashed to a wooden stake. Penultimately, his feet were nailed to the wood; ultimately he was decapitated.

‘Calvin’s justification for this excessive rebuke reveals the mindset of all Reformation inquisitors, Protestant and Catholic alike: “When the papists are so harsh and violent in defense of their superstitions” he asked, “are not Christ’s magistrates shamed to show themselves less ardent in defense of the sure truth?” Clearly, he would have condemned the Jesus of Matthew (5:39, 44) as a heretic. In Calvin’s Orwellian theocracy, established in 1542, acts of God—earthquakes, lightning, flooding—were acts of Satan. (Luther, of course, agreed.) Copernicus was branded a fraud, attendance at church and sermons was compulsory, and

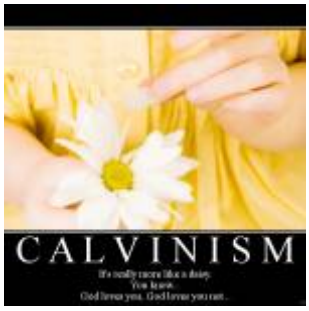
Calvin himself preached at great length three or four times a week. Refusal to take the Eucharist was a crime.

The Consistory, which made no distinction between religion and morality, could summon anyone for questioning, investigate any charge of backsliding, and entered homes periodically to be sure no one was cheating Calvin's God. Legislation specified the number of dishes to be served at each meal and the color of garments worn. What one was permitted to wear depended upon who one was, for never was a society more class–ridden. Believing that every child of God had been foreordained, Calvin was determined that each know his place; statutes specified the quality of dress and the activities allowed in each class.

'But even the elite—the clergy, of course—were allowed few diversions. Calvinists worked hard because there wasn't much else they were permitted to do. "Feasting" was proscribed; so were dancing, singing, pictures, statues, relics, church bells, organs, altar candles; "indecent or irreligious" songs, staging or attending theatrical plays; wearing rouge, jewelry, lace, or "immodest" dress; speaking disrespectfully of your betters; extravagant entertainment; swearing, gambling, playing cards, hunting, drunkenness; naming children after anyone but figures in the Old Testament; reading "immoral or irreligious" books; and sexual intercourse, except between partners of different genders who were married to one another."

Then there is Calvin's denouncing of reason and independent judgment:

"Human reason, therefore, neither approaches, not strives towards, nor takes proper aim at this truth: to understand who is the true God or what He wills to be towards us." And: "From whence come so many labyrinths of errors in the world but because men are led by their own understanding only into vanity and untruth?" And in language that foreshadows Kant: "there is reason naturally implanted within us which cannot be condemned without injustice to God. But this reason has its limits. If reason exceeds these limits, reason vanishes."




Then there is sad case of Michael Servetus, who ran afoul of Calvin's theology and made the mistake of going to Geneva.

More on Calvinism here. The poster image is an amusing take on Calvinist predestinarianism.

All of which (a) helps me understand some my extended family back in farm country, Ontario; (b) gives me hope that some other parts of the world too can learn to tame their religious fanatics; and (c) almost makes me long for the good old days.

Original Link: https://www.stephenhicks.org/2010/11/27/john-calvins-geneva/